



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 10, 2006  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent  
Philippians 1:9-11  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Malachi 3:1-4  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 24  
Second Lesson: Philippians 1:3-11  
Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

### Pray for Proper Preparations

At this time of the year a lot of people have visitors come; company comes to celebrate the holidays and family getting together. If you are hosting a holiday get together for Christmas, don't you kind of lose your mind as you are getting ready? You run around trying to make sure everything is properly prepared and everything is cooked right and everything is cleaned right, worrying about the last least little things that the rest of the time you don't care about when it is just you in your house, but when someone else is coming, you are a little bit concerned.

Preparations are really what we focus on during Advent. We prepare to celebrate Christ's coming in time at Bethlehem. We prepare ourselves as he comes to us through the Word and we also prepare ourselves for his second coming. In essence, that is a little bit what Paul was talking about when he writes to the Philippians. His prayer for them has to deal with proper preparations. Pray for proper preparations as you get ready for Christ's second coming, in essence, is what he is talking about. Notice that his prayer has nothing to do with cleaning what is on the outside. It has a lot more to do with cleaning what is on the inside—repentance, being found righteous in God's eyes and living for God. He reminds us that that comes from love abounding in knowledge and then he even defines that knowledge for us a little bit more clearly as he talks about knowledge that discerns what is best—what is lasting is literally what he says.

I don't know how familiar you are with the Book of Philippians, but you got a hint of where Paul was when he wrote this letter when we read the Second Lesson—*"whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel"* (Philippians 1:7), he said. When he wrote this letter, he was in chains. He was under house arrest, chained to a soldier in a rented place in Rome, but he was chained. He couldn't come and go as he pleased so he couldn't carry out the gospel work in the way that he thought was best certainly. That is why if you sat down this afternoon and spent maybe 10-15 minutes and read Paul's letter to the Philippians and took the time to count how many times he uses "joy" or "rejoice" or a variance of it, you might be surprised. The theme of the whole book is "rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice." He says it over and over. It's not exactly the message you would expect from a guy who is imprisoned because he was working in the Lord, but he says, "Rejoice in the Lord."

That is one of the interesting things—when he writes his prison letters, and Philippians is one of them, he talks about not being embarrassed because he is in prison, but he thanks God that he is in prison because now he has the chance to share the gospel with some people that he never would have had the chance to before. He said even some

of Caesar's household had come to faith—some of the guards that had come to him had shared the gospel and believed the gospel. So when Paul talks about knowing and testing what God's will is and what is lasting, he speaks from a bit of experience.

Philippi was the first city he came to when he came into the continent of Europe. There weren't many Jews there. There was a place by the river where Lydia and some other people that were waiting for the Messiah got together and prayed, but the Philippians were close to his heart. He said that in what we had read in our Second Lesson. They had just sent Epaphroditus to Paul in Rome from Philippi—not an easy journey by any means—to come and bring him gifts and to help him to keep spreading the gospel even as he was in prison. After they had done that he writes back to them, and no wonder he is talking about all this joy, because he sees how their faith is alive and active and supporting the work of the gospel, and it thrills him. So he writes to them and encourages them and directs them and he also says, "Here is my prayer for you. *I pray that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight*" (Philippians 1:9). The word "love" is the same word that is used when "God so loved the world"—that your love, your unconditional love, your undeserved love, the love you show others—not because they have earned it, but because you are a Christian and you want to reflect Christ's love that puts our interest ahead of his own—so your love that puts interests of others ahead of your own may grow more and more and abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

He says "*more and more*" because they were showing this kind of love, weren't they? They took the time to prepare something for him and then send Epaphroditus to him so that he could be supported. That is love in action. They were doing it, but he prays that their love may abound more and more because he knows that Satan is never going to stop attacking them so they needed to continually grow in their faith and in this kind of love. The way that happens is through knowledge—knowledge of the gospel, knowledge that God gives to us in Word and in Sacrament. That is the only thing that builds us up in this kind of love because this kind of love is not natural for us.

We don't have year-round people ringing bells to give gifts to charity, do we? It is because it is only at this time of the year that maybe some of us even think about helping others in need. This kind of love that puts the interest of others ahead of our own isn't natural to us. It has to be taught. When it is God pleasing, it flows out of the love that God has shown us in Christ first.

So he wants them to have this love that abounds more and more in knowledge and then he talks about depth of insight. These two phrases together are talking about knowledge that comes from Scripture and then depth of insight is as you go through your life and live your life, you have experiences that you go through that drive you back to the Word of God to see what God's Word says about what you are facing. We do it more often when we have problems, don't we? When we are facing difficulty or uncertainty or we are facing sorrow or grief, then we lean on God for that help and that direction. It is also talking about the kind of thing that we do even in times of joy. When things go well for us we get this depth of insight of knowing "thank you God for what you have done for me." We take the knowledge that we get in Scripture and we apply it to our daily lives.

In my time as a pastor when I have had people come through the New Life in Christ class as adults that already were members of the congregation—they went through it just to review it for themselves or they went through it with a spouse or whatever the case may be—the one thing they say to me without fail, each and every one of them, is “It is amazing how much of this I not only remember, but I look at it now differently than when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade or whatever I was when I went through confirmation instruction as a child. It is amazing how much I look at this differently and how much this has benefited me to study this.” It only makes sense, doesn’t it? In 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade or whatever it was when you went through confirmation instruction, your life experiences are pretty limited, aren’t they? Your worries are quite often limited to things like video game consoles and things like that. You get older and you have bigger worries, right? You get older and you face things that you didn’t face as a child. You face more closely and clearly the loss of a loved one. You face more clearly and closely and worry about how we are going to get through certain things. So after you have had those experiences and you see how God’s Word applies to them when you get back into the Word, it opens your eyes to see more and more this knowledge and depth of insight, and when you see God in action in your life and you recognize that he is at work helping you and sustaining you when you don’t think you can go on, then your love abounds more and more for him and for others.

That is what prepares us for Christ’s second coming, because the more I abound in knowledge and in depth of insight, the more I see quite clearly that I have nothing. I have nothing I can offer up to God and say, “God, you owe me heaven.” As I look at my daily experiences in my life and I see the things that I worry about that God tells me not to worry about, and I see the things that I do that God tells me not to do, and I see the things I say that God tells me not to say, when I think about the things I think—like we talked about in Bible study this morning that we are so glad no one else can read our thoughts—then I see just how much I need God and I need his forgiveness and how he is the one thing needful. The other things that at times I worry about and fuss about, they are here and gone.

That is also what Paul talks about when he talks about being able to discern what is best (Philippians 1:10). He says that you can see what is different—meaning different in the sense of superior from everything else—and in that way, best. What is superior, what is better are the things that have to do with what is going to be lasting, and that is our relationship with Jesus.

Think of how often, especially at this time of the year, we get caught up and wrapped up in things that don’t necessarily draw us closer to Jesus, yet we consider them parts of our Christmas celebration. Think of how often we get ourselves so worked up that we are spitting and sputtering, and do you ever stop and think, “This is how I am celebrating my Savior’s birth? Do I kind of have this backwards? Should I just slap myself in the face and wake myself up and see what I am doing?” This idea of testing what is best means you take this knowledge that comes also through experience and now you say, “What is best? What is lasting? What is it that lasts forever?” That is Christ. That is what led Paul to say, “You know what? It doesn’t matter if I am in prison because I still get to serve Jesus wherever I am.” He could test what is lasting and

could say, “Our suffering, it is here, but it is only momentary because we have an eternity with God.”

Day after day there are times we need to remind ourselves to take our focus off of the things we worry about and put it on God and see that the God who loved us enough to take away every one of those sins—every one of those sins of thoughts, words and actions—he took them all away in Jesus. Jesus was perfect where you and I have failed. Jesus was punished where you and I should be punished. As we see that and recognize that, it gives us the confidence that the one who loved us that much is going to help us through the uncertainties of life in this world. It is going to focus our attention on the things that are lasting, the things that are essential, and the things that are eternally beneficial. Even when I slip up every now and then and get worried about some of the things that aren't lasting, I know that my God forgives me and that moves me to want to serve him and focus on what he tells me to focus on.

That is Paul's prayer for the Philippians and I certainly hope it is our prayer for each other as we live together and serve in his kingdom together.